

# The Store that Goes to War

Courtesy photo

*AAFES has been in every major conflict since World War I*

by Master Sgt. Orville F. Desjarlais Jr.



With the birthday cake in place and candles lit, Regina Koenig and a few other Army and Air Force Exchange Service employees sang “Happy Birthday” to a 21-year-old colleague at Bagram Air Base, Afghanistan.

Halfway through the song a 127 mm rocket exploded on the other side of the main store.

As the service business manager, Mrs. Koenig knew the rocket had hit near the beauty shop, one of her vendors. She feared for her employees’ safety.

While everybody else scrambled for cover, unsure if another rocket would hit, Mrs. Koenig raced toward the ruckus.

When she turned a corner, she couldn’t see a thing. Dust had blotted out the sun. All she could hear were the screams of injured Soldiers. Confusion reigned. Shards of glass littered the site. Blood, everywhere.

After checking on two employees and a customer, all of whom were OK, her memory went blank. The June 16 attack had killed three Soldiers and injured 23 servicemembers and civilians. Two months later, the Army recognized Mrs. Koenig, along with three other AAFES employees, as heroes.

To this day, Mrs. Koenig doesn’t like to make a big deal about her hero status. She is more proud of having the store open just four hours after the explosion.

“We may not have had much, but it was enough to make our customers happy,” she said.

During its 109-year history, AAFES’ mission has been to follow military members no matter where they go — even if that means working in harm’s way.

## **Following the military**

The War Department issued General Order No. 46 in July 1895 that directed commanders to establish exchanges at every post as practicable. Old black-and-white photographs depict some of the first employees selling goods from tents. After the Army Exchange Service supported World War I and World War II, it was redesignated the Army and Air

**Burger King is a favorite amenity offered through the Army & Air Force Exchange Service** at deployed locations. Prior to its relocation, the Burger King at Baghdad International Airport sold more than 100,000 Whoppers monthly — that’s more than any other BK on the planet.

**For more  
info,  
visit [www.aafes.com](http://www.aafes.com).**

Force Exchange Service in July 1948. Since then, it has been involved in nearly every major conflict, including Iraq and Afghanistan. In keeping with the AAFES credo of “We Go Where You Go,” employees operate from old, bombed-out buildings, truck beds and even from aircraft.

“The ironic thing is that 109 years later we’re still on a new frontier and sometimes still working out of tents,” said Maj. Gen. Kathryn Frost, Army and Air Force Exchange Service commander.

Another similarity with the past is the challenge of getting merchandise to remote areas. AAFES lost \$6 million in the last sixth months, due primarily to convoy ambushes and hijackings. Getting merchandise “in theater” isn’t only challenging, it can be deadly. Although there hasn’t been a U.S. death associated with the movement of merchandise in Iraq — because most convoy drivers are contractors from Third World countries — there have been a number of contractors injured or killed.

**AAFES volunteer Lidya Hyan shows** Senior Airman Veronica Oliver, deployed from Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, Ohio, and Staff Sgt. Genesis Angulo, from Aviano Air Base, Italy, a collection of dolls sold by a local vendor at Manas Air Base, Kyrgyz Republic. The store, Yuri’s Gifts, is an AAFES-sponsored vendor that sells local crafts and artwork. It’s one of many locally sponsored stores AAFES provides troops at locations around the world.

by Master Sgt. Scott Wogers



Despite the danger, employees continue to occasionally convoy to remote outposts to organize “rodeos.” They do this only when an outpost has no base or post exchange. Employees sell merchandise off truck tailgates and from the back of aircraft so that troops can at least buy the essentials — like toiletries, socks and underwear.

“You won’t find a work force more committed to the troops than our volunteers who deploy in-theater,” the general said. “They are willing to put themselves at risk to take care of Soldiers and Airmen downrange. It’s a phenomenal story of commitment and courage, and it’s unprecedented.”

### Living large

A large part of AAFES’ mission takes place during an Airman’s time off.

“We’re doing the best we can to make an awful environment a little more pleasant for the troops,” General Frost said.

When the war with Iraq first started, AAFES had an exchange operational before the fall of Baghdad. It moved into place so quickly, employees used quarters to rub the imprint from credit cards at some locations because they didn’t have credit card machines.

Today, base and post exchanges in-theater carry

everything from DVD players to laptop computers. Commercial cargo planes fly in magazines, CDs and DVDs so patrons can buy the same merchandise as their counterparts in the States — not outdated material.

Soldiers and Airmen can even get pedicures, manicures and massages at some camps — amenities many stateside bases don’t offer.

“We bring them the services they are accustomed to at home,” said Anthony King, Manas store manager in the Kyrgyz Republic. “Increased morale equates to better protection for our country.”

### Smiles go a mile

When customers are happy, so are store employees, according to General Frost. She said store associates in Iraq don’t talk about sales, they talk about smiles.

“It’s nice to come here and discover the real reason why AAFES was founded,” Mr. King said. “Everybody appreciates you out here.”

Mr. King enjoys his job so much he volunteered to serve in-theater longer than the standard six months. He spent two months in Saudi Arabia, seven months in Kuwait and then moved to his current job at Manas. When he returns home, he’ll have spent two years deployed in the war zone.

In stateside shoppettes, base exchanges and gas stations, store employees don’t get the chance to interact with customers on a personal level. In Iraq and Afghanistan, many AAFES volunteers say that barrier crumbles to nothing. They know their patrons — their names, the names of their family members, their likes and dislikes.

“AAFES associates say they are truly thanked every day,” said Chief Master Sgt. Dale Myers, enlisted advisor for General Frost. “They get a sense of accomplishment. They also get to see what their customers do during times of war, and they gain a better appreciation for the military.”

The general said many volunteers extend or return to the harsh conditions endured in war zones. “They thrive in those environments,” she said. “They learn to lead, and they come back better people.”

courtesy photo



**During its 109-year history,** the Army and Air Force Exchange Service mission has been to support military members, anytime, anyplace. AAFES was there when the Air Force became a service, and it’s still supporting Airmen today during Operations Iraqi and Enduring Freedom.

### Willing to go again

After the rocket attack at Bagram, Mrs. Koenig eventually returned to her home post at Fort Drum, N.Y.

After spending six months deployed, she says she’d do it again, if asked. Employees receive a bonus of 10 to 25 percent of their pay when they volunteer to serve at locations supporting Operations Enduring Freedom or Iraqi Freedom.

“We’re not there just for the [increase in pay],” Mrs. Koenig said. “We’re there for the Soldiers. We have no weapons to protect ourselves, but we still go.” ☼

### AAFES facts

■ The Army and Air Force Exchange Service has 31 stores in Iraq, 10 in Kuwait, two in Qatar and one in the United Arab Emirates, one in the Kyrgyz Republic, Uzbekistan, Afghanistan and Djibouti. Also, there are eight AAFES exchanges in the Balkans.

■ More than 275 of the 450 deployed employees are supporting operations in Iraq.